



Animal Welfare Institute

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March 24, 2026

Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee
Maryland General Assembly
2 East Miller Senate Office Building
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: Support for HB 53

Dear Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee:

On behalf of the Animal Welfare Institute, a national nonprofit animal advocacy organization with thousands of members and supporters in Maryland, I respectfully urge you to support HB 53. This bill would prohibit the private possession of zebras and macropods, including kangaroos, wallaroos, and wallabies. It would have no impact on exhibitors, including zoos, and current private owners would be grandfathered in and simply required to register their animals. This registration requirement is designed to ensure that first responders and animal control officers are aware of the presence of these wild animals in their communities. The bill would also remove an outdated exemption for “helper monkeys.”

HB 53 builds upon Maryland’s current prohibition on the private ownership of several wild animals, including bears, nonhuman primates, wild cats, and certain venomous snakes, due to public safety risks—strengthening Maryland’s commonsense restrictions and proactive stance on wild animals as pets. A ban on the private possession of these wild animals is in the best interest of the community, first responders, and the animals themselves.

Public Safety

Keeping wild animals as pets endangers both the owners and others in the community. Unlike domesticated equine species, zebras are non-domesticated animals who exhibit unpredictable behavior such as biting, kicking, rearing, and striking with their forelegs. They are strong, muscular, and capable of overpowering people. News reports have documented privately owned zebras seriously injuring their owners and others. For instance, in 2021, a zebra being kept as a pet in Ohio bit his owner’s arm so badly that it almost needed to be amputated.¹ In 2015, a pet zebra in Arkansas mauled the adult son of his owner.²

¹ Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/ohio-zebra-attack-farm-rcna74911>

² Available at: <https://www.kark.com/news/family-owned-zebra-attacks-white-county-district-judge/>

Zebras also pose a threat to the community when they escape their enclosures. For example, in August of 2021, several zebras escaped from the property of Jerry Lee Holly, a breeder and trader of exotic animals in Upper Marlboro, Maryland.³ Two of the zebras evaded capture for four months, posing a danger to the public as they wandered near residential homes and across public roads and railways. A third zebra was found dead in an illegal snare trap a month later. A fourth zebra, who had not escaped, was found dead on the breeder's property. In response to these incidents, the breeder was charged with three counts of animal cruelty, but was ultimately acquitted of these charges.⁴

Kangaroos, wallaroos, and wallabies also pose a serious public safety risk. These large, powerful animals are prone to attack when they feel trapped or threatened, and escapes occur easily because they can jump over almost any fence. They can physically overpower people and are capable of killing people, with some kangaroos standing as high as seven feet tall. Kangaroos kept as pets and in captivity have been documented biting and injuring children and attacking their owners.⁵ When on the loose, they are a threat to the public, pets, and native wildlife.

Animal Welfare

Keeping wild animals as pets is detrimental to the animals themselves. Human homes cannot meet their physical and social needs. In addition, veterinarians at most pet clinics are not trained or practiced in their care. Without proper veterinary care, animals are left vulnerable to stress, captivity-related diseases, and other complex medical issues, potentially leading to suffering and premature death.

In the wild, zebras form large social herds consisting of several hundred individuals and migrate hundreds of miles annually. They form close bonds with their family groups.⁶ As pets, they often suffer from boredom and stress imposed by their captivity that can exacerbate aggressive behavior.⁷ In the U.S., zebras can carry diseases such as equine infectious anemia,⁸ which they can transmit to horses and other equines, and equine herpesvirus 9,⁹ which they can transmit to other animals.

Kangaroos, wallabies, and wallaroos require extremely large, grassy areas in which to live and interact with others of the same species for their social well-being. In the pet trade, joeys (baby macropods) are often prematurely taken from their mothers, which can cause long-term psychological harm if they survive the early separation. Additionally, macropods require specialized diets and are prone to serious captivity-related health issues such as lumpy jaw

³ Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/14/us/maryland-zebra-captured.html>

⁴ Available at: <https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/prince-georges-county/owner-of-escaped-maryland-zebras-found-not-guilty-of-animal-cruelty/3453213/>

⁵ See, e.g., <https://news4sanantonio.com/news/local/11-year-old-boy-bitten-by-a-kangaroo-in-his-own-northwest-side-backyard-san-antonio-animal-care-services-texas-sonoma-ranch-red>

⁶ Available at: https://ielc.libguides.com/sdzg/factsheets/plains_zebra/behavior

⁷ Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0749073917307137>

⁸ Available at: <https://www.aphis.usda.gov/livestock-poultry-disease/equine/infectious-anemia>

⁹ Available at: <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/17337/>

(inflammation and infection of the jaw bone),¹⁰ gastrointestinal blockages, and fatal toxoplasmosis infections,¹¹ which can infect humans.

Community Resources

Keeping exotic animals as pets unnecessarily strains community resources. Local police officers and other first responders generally are not trained or equipped to handle escaped wild animals and are often put in danger in such situations. The time and expense required to respond to such incidents also strain resources needed elsewhere. In the U.S., escaped zebras and kangaroos have led first responders on numerous prolonged and dangerous search efforts, resulting in roadway closures, accidents, and in some cases, the animals' deaths.¹²

The presence of these animals in the community also strains the resources of nonprofit animal sanctuaries. When private owners realize the dangers and costs associated with keeping exotic animals as pets, they often end up relinquishing them to wildlife sanctuaries. With limited resources, these sanctuaries sadly cannot assist every animal in need of rescue.

Removing the Helper Monkey Exemption

HB 53 also removes an exemption from Maryland's dangerous animal law that permits the use of "helper monkeys." Helper monkeys (often capuchin monkeys) are intended to assist individuals with mobility-limiting disabilities by performing daily tasks. Despite the importance of ensuring that people living with disabilities receive the assistance and support needed to thrive, monkeys—even those raised in captivity and socialized to humans—are non-domesticated wild animals with unpredictable behavior. The Americans with Disabilities Act's implementing regulations define "service animal" as only including dogs.¹³

Removing the helper monkey exemption will enhance public safety. Small monkeys have attacked their owners, other people, and children in numerous incidents across the U.S., including in Maryland. For example, in 2009 in Salem, Oregon, a small monkey brought to a park by his owner bit a six-year-old girl, requiring the girl to take antibiotics.¹⁴ Monkeys can also transmit life-threatening diseases to humans, including yellow fever, pox viruses, hepatitis, foamy virus, herpes B virus, Ebola, dengue, and simian immunodeficiency virus.¹⁵ The risk of injury or infection from a primate may pose an even more serious hazard to someone living with a disability.

Furthermore, helper monkeys are now uncommon. Helping Hands (now Envisioning Access) was the primary organization that trained and placed helper monkeys, but no longer does

¹⁰ Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7690803/>

¹¹ Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11858611/>

¹² See, e.g.: <https://www.cnn.com/2025/04/30/us/video/alabama-kangaroo-interstate-digvid>;
<https://abc11.com/post/pet-zebra-escapes-home-is-fatally-shot-by-its-owner/5224119/>

¹³ Available at: <https://www.ada.gov/resources/service-animals-2010-requirements/>

¹⁴ Available at: <https://kcbv.com/news/local/monkey-in-diaper-bites-girl-6-in-city-park-11-13-2015>

¹⁵ Available at: <https://www.nationalacademies.org/read/10713/chapter/5>

so.¹⁶ Their business now focuses on innovative assistive technologies such as robots to improve individuals' mobility, access, and quality of life.

Conclusion

Prohibiting the private possession of zebras, kangaroos, wallaroos, and wallabies, as well as removing the outdated exemption for helper monkeys, ensures the safety of Maryland citizens and protects these animals from suffering as pets. I respectfully request your support for HB 53.

Sincerely,

Kate Dylewsky
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Animal Welfare Institute
www.awionline.org

¹⁶ Available at: <https://www.envisioningaccess.org/>